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ABSTRACT

This paper begins by reviewing evidence nationally, provincially, and locally that many students drop out of secondary school; that failure rates in core subjects in grades 9 and 10 in Ontario are high; and that ninth graders in Ontario reported being concerned about their school progress, their level of preparation and readiness for high school, and their knowledge of school policies. Core issues in transition to and continuous progress in secondary school are identified as being in the areas of: (1) guidance and counseling; (2) continuity and integration of curriculum; (3) suitability of curricular and extracurricular programs to student needs; (4) perceived clarity and even-handedness of school policies; and (5) staff accessibility. The major part of the paper concerns policies and procedures for facilitating the transition to secondary school. Section I concentrates on policies and practices which facilitate the transitional period. Section II focuses on policies and practices which facilitate transition in the longer term, and appear to contribute to high retention, academic success, and student satisfaction. A final section summarizes the ideas put forward in sections I and II and can serve as a starting point for discussion and decision-making. Sixty-seven references and two appendices are included; the appendices list relevant Ontario and City of Toronto documents and provide an excerpt from a recent book from Britain on curriculum continuity. (NB)

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MOVING FROM ELEMENTARY TO SECONDARY SCHOOL: PROCEDURES WHICH MAY FACILITATE THE TRANSITION PROCESS

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#182

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is evidence nationally, provincially and locally that many students drop out of secondary school without earning a diploma. Failure rates in core subjects in Grades 9 and 10 in Ontario are high. Self-reported information from Grade 9 students in Ontario suggests that many students are worried about their progress in school, their level of preparation and readiness for secondary school, and their knowledge of important school policies.

A great many ideas for successful transition are put forward in the literature. These involve the new students, the older students, staff and parents. The emphasis is on transition as an on-going concern, in which students' needs are for stability and continuous progress before, during and after their move from one school panel to another. Transition concerns the whole student - his academic and social needs - and the whole school - not just the guidance staff, but the entire staff and the student leadership.

Core issues in transition to and continuous progress in secondary school are (1) the guidance and counselling program, including career counselling across the curriculum; (2) continuity and integration of curriculum between and within panels; (3) suitability of curricular and extra-curricular programs to the needs of the students; (4) perceived clarity and even-handedness of school policies; and (5) staff accessibility.

Procedures for facilitating transition can be organized under the headings of orientation induction and articulation long-term transition. Eight procedures are listed under the first heading, and nine under the second.

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Introduction

Any transition has the potential to be hazardous. A transition is both a place - a bridge, a crossing from one point to another - and also a time - a period during which one is exposed or vulnerable. During a transition, one is trying to function effectively in a different environment, at the same time that one is learning the rules. The transition from elementary to secondary school is one that young adolescents, already in the midst of rapid physiological transition to adulthood, approach with mixed feelings. A significant part of that mixture is apprehension. Grade 8 students have a myriad of anticipated concerns about how they will fare in high school - how they will learn a new system quickly enough to function successfully from the beginning. Many of these anticipated worries are exaggerated and transitory, and are no longer concerns a few months later [1]. But other concerns persist, either because they are more significant on a continuing, long-term basis or because they have been unsatisfactorily addressed during the period of preparation/orientation.

Indicators of Difficulty in Transition to Secondary School

How do we know whether or not an individual or a group of individuals has made a successful transition to secondary school? There are several methods of obtaining answers to this question. One is on the basis of student interview or questionnaire. Grade 9 students can be asked to evaluate the transition process - the orientation program, etc. - as well as their own success in "learning the ropes". Other indicators of successful transition and subsequent integration are inferential, and these include student marks during, and perhaps after, Grade 9; course failure rates, in Grade 9 and after; and drop-out rates in the first two years of high school (when students turn 16). Presumably, barring other important intervening factors, students who are experiencing a smooth transition and integration into secondary school will: express positive attitudes to the school and its program; pass all of their courses; and remain in school to finish the program and accumulate the total number of credits needed to earn a diploma.

Information from Toronto and Ontario (and it is not unlike information from elsewhere) indicates that more students leave secondary school during or just after their second year (at or near their sixteenth birthday) than at any other point [2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. For these students, transition has been unsuccessful.

It is well-documented that students who leave school without earning a diploma tend to have been unsuccessful students in terms of course marks. They are often older than most of their peers, because they have failed and repeated courses [5]. High course failure rates have been documented in Ontario [6] and

suggest that the experience of failure in grades 9 and 10 is widespread. Students who leave school permanently at age 16 are certainly over-represented in this group which experiences failure early in secondary school.

When students in grade 9 are asked questions which relate to their experience of the transition to secondary school, they tell us something of the difficulties they experience.

One set of student self-report data comes from an Ontario-wide study done at O.I.S.E. for the Ministry of Education in 1973 [1]. Most of the responses to questions asked of students in Grade 9 indicated that the majority of students had not found the transition to be difficult. For example, four fifths reported having made an easy adjustment to secondary school. Three quarters found it easy to meet people and get involved. Most found it to be not very different from Grade 8; in fact, they expected it to be more different than it was. Almost half said they definitely enjoyed their first year of high school, and over half felt well-prepared.

While all these are positive indicators for the majority of students, the minority they omit is a significant one. For example, 7% of those who came from public schools and 9.5% of those from separate schools did not find it easy to meet people and get involved. 15% of both groups found high school to be very different from their last school. And, while 49% of public school alumni and 63% of separate school alumni felt that their course work had prepared them well for high school, and two thirds of all the students felt that their Grade 9 teachers were satisfied with their work, that leaves at least one third feeling not well-prepared, and feeling that they are not meeting teacher expectations in Grade 9. A very revealing finding is that only one quarter of the students disagreed with the statement "Teachers did not know the work we had covered." The problem of non-continuity of curriculum was found to be a possible major cause of falling motivation and achievement among new secondary students (Grade 7) in an important study from England of transition to secondary school [8].

Another set of data is found in a report called "Bridging the Gap", which was prepared by the York Region Board of Education in 1984 [9]. It reports on questionnaire data from one cohort of students from Grades 8 and 9 and gives information on what issues they expected to be problematic in high school, and which ones actually were so. One significant problem identified by Grade 9 students was a difficulty in understanding their teachers. This was expressed by nearly one third of students at the Advanced and General level, and half that proportion taking Basic level courses. The report indicates that it is unclear whether it is teachers' language or general behavior that baffles these students, but the writers suggest that the problem may be a reflection of the difficulty some students have in adjusting to a greater subject emphasis in high school. Other issues that concern more than 10% of the Grade 9 students include ignorance of policies on absence and homework, and doubt about their ability to handle homework and exams. They also register

uncertainty about how to get involved in extracurricular activities.

Successful Transition

What are the component parts of a successful transition to secondary school? We would expect them to involve: informed decision-making in choice of secondary program; effective academic and social orientation programs during the period of transition; and a reasonable degree of continuity in curriculum, including course content, teaching styles, and teacher expectations.

The remainder of this paper will address the question of what policies and practices are associated with successful transition. We will divide our discussion into two parts:

I. The problem of transition: policies and practices which facilitate the transitional period.

II. The problem of transition: policies and practices which facilitate transition in the longer term, and appear to contribute to high retention, academic success and student satisfaction.

A final section summarizes the ideas put forward in Sections I and II in a general way and can serve as a starting point for discussion and decision-making.

I. PRACTICES AND POLICIES WHICH FACILITATE THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD

As students move through school from one organizational level (e.g. elementary school) to another (e.g. high school), there are "breaks" or "gaps" that can potentially interrupt the natural continuity of the student's progress.

A search of the Canadian, U.S. and British literature over the last twenty-five years showed that an extensive variety of programs and practices had been attempted to help students ease the transition. These programs served a wide age range of students, but most of them focus on students being promoted from Grades 6 to 7 and/or Grades 8 to 9.

Formal needs assessments were used only in a few instances to validate observed problems, and to determine the specific nature and extent of the problems [9, 10, 11]. Most of the programs described in the literature were developed without such an investigation. The common problems identified by the few existing needs assessments can be categorized as follows:

1. Need for the students to have pertinent and timely information about the new school environment, routines, rules, expectations, curriculum, course requirements, student activities, services available and other essential information.

2. Need for the staff to bridge grades in order to develop understanding and insight to facilitate the linkages between the panels.

3. Need for the parents to be informed so that they can guide and assist their children to make appropriate education decisions.

Two common themes emphasized in the literature are that:

1. The issue of transition is an ongoing concern - students need stability and continuous progression preceding, during and following their first move from one school panel to the next. A properly worked out articulation program should be a process rather than an event that lasts for one day or a week.

2. The induction program should be concerned with the total adjustment of the student - personal, social, as well as academic adjustment.

The wealth of information about transition programs and practices can be organized under the following topics:

A. Types of transition practices and programs,
B. Assignment of responsibilities to staff and older students,
C. Transfer of records,
D. Evaluation of program effectiveness.

A. Types of Transition Practices and Programs

Since very few of the literature sources had measured the effectiveness of the transition programs through some kind of formal evaluation, this section becomes more a compilation of existing (or suggested) articulation practices than an identification of effective programs.

The majority of the practices and programs described in the literature are targeted toward the students in transition. Some are aimed at the parents of these students, while others are designed for school staff from the two panels to have better communications.

1. Students

Several pre-entrance orientation practices affect students in the year before going to the new school. They include:

(1) full or partial rotary system in the feeder school [1].

(2) having the elementary teachers assign a limited amount of regular homework similar in volume and complexity to what it will be like in high school [12].

(3) some experience in writing exams [1].

(4) teaching a unit on orientation to the high school-bound students [17].

(5) offer of short-term after-school program for high school-bound students to sample those subjects which would be new to them in high school [14].

(6) exhibiting high school student work in the feeder school and vice versa [10].

(7) involving elementary students in high school clubs and organizations [10].

(8) planning joint performance or activities involving students from both panels [10].

(9) exchanging school newspapers and publications [10].

(10) having student activities groups from upper level school perform for feeder school students [10].

(11) having elementary students present an assembly program at their future high school [17].

(12) having the elementary school share learning space and facilities with the high school [1, 65].

Most commonly, orientation activities occur during the last term before the transfer, usually in March through June. Such activities are:

(1) high school principal and/or guidance counsellor visits the feeder schools to meet incoming students [13].

(2) guided tours or visits of the new school [12, 27, 28].

(3) audio-visual presentations of the school buildings and activities [27, 29].

(4) distribution of materials, such as maps, floor plan, student handbook, school calendar [27].

(5) an assembly to introduce the key school staff and student leaders [21].

(6) large or small group discussions, explanation, question and answer periods led by teachers and/or student leaders about pertinent topics such as [21, 27]:

a) rules and regulations, school routines and procedures (e.g. tardiness, absences, conduct standards, homework policies, how to make changes in timetables, etc.);

b) course offerings, course contents, graduation requirements, credit system;

c) study skills (how to organize out-of-school time for homework, how to prepare and write exams);

d) teachers' expectations for different subjects;

e) services and facilities available (e.g. school library, media center, nurse's offices, counselling service)

(7) tour of display booths with posters and signs about clubs and activities accompanied by a sign-up procedure [61, 64].

(8) orientation games, quizzes and activities to allow the prospective students to become more familiar with each other, the staff and the school building [66].

(9) administering achievement tests to the incoming students [66].

(10) scheduling small groups of students from the feeder schools to attend a few actual classes at the high school together with the high school students to get a taste of the course contents and school routines [10, 15, 16].

(11) having the Grade 9 homeroom teacher spending part of a morning with his/her entire class of incoming students in the homeroom in June, taking attendance, explaining rules and regulations, etc. so that students can get to know both the teacher and one another before school opens in September [61].

(12) dealing with changes and concerns about course changes, timetable or placement before September to minimize changes

in the fall [13, 63].

(13) distribution of bulletin to high school-bound students before the summer holidays on topics such as how to get ready for the first day of school, what to expect, what to bring and what bus to take [22].

(14) suggestions about reading and activities which incoming students could do during the summer to prepare for Grade 9 [21].

Some districts made use of the summer prior to the transition for orientation activities. For example:

(1) summer 'head start' program or summer camp for the new intakes to better understand the course content, experience school routines, meet new classmates and teachers and become familiar with the physical plant. This has been evaluated in Minnesota and New York and found to be effective [14, 18, 19, 20].

(2) unguided tours (schools open for the incoming students before the opening day so that they can walk through the building as often as they like to locate their classrooms) [24, 25, 33].

(3) having class lists posted at the main entrance of new school one week before opening to allow students to know who their homeroom teacher and classmates will be [24].

(4) having locks and lockers and student cards available the week before school starts [63].

Activities that occur in the beginning of the new term in secondary school are:

(1) staggered opening in September, so that each new class can have the full attention of the entire staff on the opening day [30];

(2) recruiting and assigning upper class students as "buddies", "big brothers", or "big sisters" to accompany the newcomers to various parts of the school and to answer questions [24, 27].

In addition, some of the activities that take place in the term before the transition as described above (#2 through 9 on page 6) also occur on the opening day or week in September [26, 31, 32].

Still other orientation practices may pervade the program of the school during the first year, or longer:

(1) the establishment of cycles of exploratory courses to familiarize students with elective offerings [33];

(2) having the elementary teacher transfer with his/her pupils

to secondary school and continue to be class teacher in basic subjects for one year [34];

(3) assignment of the new incoming students to the same teacher-adviser or home room teacher for the first and possibly for three consecutive years [13, 28, 42].

(4) having the same teacher teach more than one subject or period to minimize the amount of movement and the number of adults the new students have to interact with [12, 13]. The practice of having teachers for more than one period has been rated as helpful [12].

(5) having a group of approximately 100 non-graded students stay together in a teaching-learning unit throughout their secondary school career, like a "school within a school" [62].

(6) individual counselling sessions or "developmental seminars" for "high risk" and underachieving first year secondary school students. Program evaluations showed favourable results [35, 36].

(7) the scheduling of regular small group sessions (e.g during English or PE classes) for students, teachers and/or counsellor to share ideas, opinions and feelings and to become more familiar with each other [11, 23].

(8) cross-grade combination of groups of students to meet regularly for reading and discussion periods, thus enabling the new students to make friends with the older students, thereby reducing harassment [27].

2. Parents

Most of the schools in the literature surveyed believed that parents of students in transition need some sort of orientation program as well. The value of parent participation has been rated quite high by various groups [12]. Such programs commonly take the form of an evening meeting, in either the feeder or receiving school, or both, usually in the spring prior to the transition. Some schools invite the students to accompany their parents to the evening meetings [13, 24, 25]. A typical parent orientation night includes the following activities [13, 24, 25, 29, 38,]:

- a brief introduction of the staff;
- large group presentation or small group discussion led by staff on topics such as course contents, course offerings, groupings and placement guidelines, school plant, extra-curricular activities and rules and general expectations;
- distribution of literature on courses and career options, and general information about the new school;
- an audio-visual presentation;

- tour of the receiving school;

- a question and answer period;

- refreshments.

A few other alternative programs mentioned in the literature include:

(1) producing a local television program, well advertised in advance and strategically timed to reach parents who cannot attend parent orientation night [29];

(2) having the guidance counsellor make summer visits to the homes of the incoming students to discuss the new school [17, 37];

(3) setting up individual parent-counsellor conferences at the receiving school during the weekdays, evenings or Saturdays prior to the transition to enable parents to discuss information which they feel the school officials should know about their child. Favourable student outcomes were evidenced by a formal evaluation done three years after the transition [67].

(4) inviting groups of parents to have lunch with the principal in the school during the first three months of school, so that parents can interact with the principal informally, see the students in class and observe the school's daily operation [40];

(5) social evening for parents to meet with teachers informally and to meet other new parents [14];

(6) teacher-parent conference during the first term to discuss the student's initial progress [14].

3. Staff

The literature indicates that few schools have developed policies to promote communications between staff of the grades being bridged. However, the few that did, provided many ideas. With the exception of simply familiarizing feeder school staff with course offerings at the upper level school, the other activities involve temporary physical movement of staff, in order to increase their knowledge and understanding of the curriculum of the sending or receiving school. The several ways this can occur are:

(1) to invite elementary school teachers to an informal social event in high school to familiarize them with practices and rules of high school [17]; (this could be done in May/June in conjunction with #17, below);

(2) to have guidance counsellors from high school visit and meet with teachers in feeder schools to become acquainted with the progress of the various groups and to aid class

placement [10, 12, 37];

(3) to have the two staffs talk about the strengths/ weaknesses and special needs of students after the submission of registration forms [13];

(4) to have inter-school visits where teaching styles and pupils' classroom behavior can be observed [1, 14];

(5) to have team teaching involving teachers from both panels [14];

(6) to send elementary school teachers to high school department meetings [1, 10];

(7) to have teachers from the two panels to exchange teach for a day or two [10, 17, 65];

(8) to have a joint professional development day to share teaching techniques [1, 10];

(9) to pair teachers with similar subjects or programs from the two bridging grades [10];

(10) to have the high school department heads, particularly the core subjects, ascertain the content and methods of the work associated with their particular discipline in the feeder schools [65];

(11) to have faculty and administrators from both panels serve as members of a task force on transition for exchange of ideas on orientation [29];

(12) to have regular meetings of the two sets of staff to deal with entry and exit program, as well as curriculum duplications [10, 17, 65];

(13) to exchange written documents about the schools (e.g. school brochures) and various aspects of the curriculum (e.g. an elementary school math scheme, a high school statement on English teaching) [65];

(14) to remove the major obstacle to liaison by improving staffing ratios so that teachers can be released from classrooms to pursue contacts [65];

(15) to appoint a full-time teacher to promote linkages between staff of both panels by covering for classes so that staff can meet within and between schools; convening, chairing and minuting meetings between staff; working closely with small groups of pupils during the induction periods, etc. [14];

(16) to appoint a person to serve as headmaster or headmistress over each high school and its feeder schools to insure continuity in the curriculum, focus attention on each student's balance of studies, and assure that complete cumulative records of studies for each student are kept,

etc. [62];

(17) to have high school teachers reporting back to primary teachers on how their previous students have fared in the first year of high school [14].

Communication and cooperation between professional staff of different panels were considered by a group of New Jersey respondents as effective but inadequate and in need of improvement [12].

Meetings between teachers at the two levels, and observing and actually teaching classes at the other level from their own are activities designed to make teachers more sensitive to the needs, abilities, and academic experience of the students they share. For the teachers of the feeder schools, the experience will aid them in understanding what will be expected of their pupils next year, and what preparation they need. For the secondary level teachers, a look at their prospective pupils and the curricula they are dealing with will help them to plan appropriately for the fall. The result in both cases should be better articulation of curriculum content and teaching methods, and hence a smoother transition for students.

B. Assignment of Responsibilities to Staff and Older Students

Most of the orientation programs require a great deal of time and energy in organization. Often, the major responsibilities of organization fall on the shoulders of the already overburdened guidance counsellors. However, the literature suggests ways of redistributing the workload among various resources from within and outside the school.

The administrative staff can share some of the responsibilities of helping students in transition [12, 21]. The vice principal and a teacher, for example, can co-chair a staff committee or task force on transition, with the guidance department represented but not having the primary responsibility.

Teachers, especially those who are interested in counselling or administrative careers can act as "advisors" during the first few weeks of school to handle "routine" problems (e.g. changing schedules) and referring major problems to the counsellors. Students often feel more comfortable with teacher-advisers than with the guidance counsellor because of frequent contact on an informal basis [41, 42].

Department heads and subject teachers, instead of guidance counsellors, can explain course contents before students select high school subjects.

Other staff members within the school such as the clerical staff, aides, consultants, social workers, nurse and psychologists are also mentioned as possible resource persons [41]. The literature suggests that in order to have an effective induction program, as many staff members as possible

should participate [21].

Another resource within the school is the student body including representatives from the Student Council, merit scholars, top students, band members, club members, athletic reps, graduates of previous years' counselling group, or student volunteers who have good recommendations from teachers. Evaluation of several peer group orientation programs in the U.S. showed positive results [12, 43, 44, 45].

Student facilitators can help in the following capacities [26, 27, 36, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48]:

(1) as "buddy", "big brother/big sister" or student helper to the incoming students during the first few days or weeks of school;

(2) as tour guides during the spring, summer or fall orientation;

(3) as editors of magazines or student handbook for next year's intakes;

(4) as producers of an audio-visual presentation about the school history, activities, etc.;

(5) as members of the Orientation Committee or Task Force to give suggestions to the staff;

(6) as discussion leaders/resource persons in the question-and-answer sessions to deal with concerns of new intakes, e.g. rumors, harassment of newcomers;

(7) as presenters in an assembly about school rules and regulations, extra-curricular activities, etc.;

(8) as counsellors' assistants in small group counselling sessions for the "high-risk" new students.

The student helpers are usually recruited and trained by the school staff for the task. Some schools even provide regular follow-up and review meetings so that the peer facilitators can share concerns, problems and suggestions among themselves, and also with the staff [27, 43, 44, 46].

Several advantages in using peer facilitators in orientation programs are pointed out in the literature. They are that:

(1) student helpers are more effective in conveying a sense of school spirit than the staff;

(2) the new students can identify easily with the peer facilitators who have recently gone through the same transition experience;

(3) the new students see role models who are knowledgeable and articulate;

(4) such activities guide the behavior of students into productive channels.

Two other groups of resource persons outside the school can be utilized. One group is the interns from the nearby colleges and universities. The other group is the parents, who can be a valuable source of help as members of a task force or committee on transition, and also as sponsors of activities such as games and picnics on the weekends or in the summer before school opens. Such activities can bring together high school teachers, new students and parents from various feeder schools for an informal gathering [24, 30].

C. Transfer of Records

Crucial to the movement of students from one educational level to another is the transfer of academic and personal records. Proper transfer of records enhances effective student guidance and counselling, which is an essential factor of good articulation [12]. In order to maintain continuity in the flow of information from one organizational level to the next, the documents transferred should meet the following conditions:

1) the information has to be sufficient;

2) the information has to be accurate;

3) the information has to be pertinent;

4) the information has to arrive at the receiving school on time;

5) the information has to reach the appropriate staff members.

Typically, the kinds of student documents transferred include past academic records, past standardized achievement test scores, past psychological records and immunization records [49, 50]. In addition to these, some literature suggests samples of the student's work, guidance records, student prescription folders outlining work done and work to be done in the various subjects, counsellor's notes about the student from parent interviews, as well as personal data sheets indicating the student's goals, aspirations, career plans and attitudes [10, 50, 65, 67]. The flow of information can also occur in the reverse direction with the upper level school sending back to the lower level school records of student's subsequent progress.

The need for additional formal, written testing of students upon entrance to the new school can be avoided if the transferred documents from the feeder schools are sufficient, accurate and arrive on the prescribed date. It has been emphasized that the information should arrive early enough for the placement of students, practical scheduling matters, and other planning activities prior to the arrival of the new intakes [14].

The transfer of documents from the elementary panel to the

secondary may risk the perpetuation of negative expectations for some students. However, this problem can be resolved if the information is screened before dissemination to the staff members to allow the students a new start [14].

It has been pointed out in the literature that the transferred records should not stop with the administration or guidance staff. They must reach the subject teachers who have to deal with the new intakes directly [14].

D. Evaluation of Program Effectiveness

To appraise the effectiveness of its orientation program, a school must determine its objectives. Objectives can be stated in terms of outcomes indicated by student behavior, student attitudes and students' knowledge of the new school. A number of outcome measures that have been suggested or tried out in the literature are:

1. Student behavior: average marks, school marks, failure rate, attendance, conduct ratings, number of disciplinary referrals, dropout rates, length of adjustment period, participation in extra-curricular activities [18, 27, 33, 41, 51, 52, 67].

2. Student attitude and feelings: attitude survey administered to students, school staff and parents; semantic differential test; self concept test [19, 35, 44, 46, 52, 53].

3. Student knowledge: quiz or multiple-choice test of information about the new school; teachers' observations of how informed students are about the curriculum [19, 32, 52].

Groups of students, similar in age, sex and social background can then be compared. Outcome measures of experimental students (those who have had exposure to the orientation program) are compared to those of the control or baseline group (students from a previous cohort who have had no orientation program, or students from the same cohort who did not participate in the orientation) [19, 28, 35, 44, 67].

Experimental groups who are exposed to different orientation techniques (e.g five-day program vs half-day program) can also be compared to determine the cost-effectiveness and benefits of the various approaches [52, 53, 54].

The short and long term effects of the program can be determined by having the evaluation done immediately after the completion of orientation and at several time points later, e.g. the end of the mid-term and the end of the school year [9, 19, 43, 53, 67].

II. POLICIES AND PRACTICES WHICH FACILITATE TRANSITION IN THE LONGER TERM AND APPEAR TO CONTRIBUTE TO HIGH RETENTION, ACADEMIC SUCCESS, AND STUDENT SATISFACTION

If a student's successful transition to secondary school is defined by her/his early and continuing success then a definition of successful transition would include low failure rate, graduation, and a high degree of expressed satisfaction with secondary school. Several researchers have undertaken studies which depend on observation, questionnaires and interviews to describe the program and the staff and students' behavior in schools whose student bodies are characterized by a high degree of success and satisfaction.

A. The Guidance and Counselling Program, Including Career Counselling

One of the factors which is repeatedly cited as important to student success and satisfaction is the guidance program. What seems to be particularly important about that program is its career counselling component. Thus, an Ontario-wide study found that the two factors most strongly related to high retention (low drop-out) rates were the ease of access by students to a variety of career information; and class visits by persons representing a variety of career types [6].

In another study [5] high school drop-outs were asked what school-related factors might have kept them in school. Two of the three they were in the strongest agreement on were: more opportunities for work/study programs, and more counselling.

Other studies point to the importance of the guidance and counselling services in a more general sense, apart from career orientation. King and his colleagues found that, in schools with high retention rates, a relatively high proportion of students visit the guidance department at the request of the counsellors [6]. The guidance function is critical and central in achieving articulation between elementary and secondary schools, to the benefit of students. Frey found that principals cited the guidance program itself as the one most difficult to integrate, in part because of the lack of certificated guidance personnel at the elementary level with whom secondary guidance counsellors could liaise [55]. Such liaison, or the lack of it, can be critical in all areas related to transition and integration from the forwarding of records, through orientation, and including the optimal use of all elementary records at the secondary level.

B. Continuity of Curriculum

It is not only the guidance program which depends upon liaison between staff of the two school levels for articulation and continuity of learning opportunities. In every curriculum area there is a need for teachers of secondary and host schools to come together [65]. Their purpose is to discuss objectives and integration of subject, as well as to experience first-hand

the climate of the school and classroom, the school policies and teaching methods of the other-level school. The variety of ways in which such contacts may be effected are listed in Section I, A. 3, above. (See also the Appendix.) The importance of such articulation is illustrated by studies in Ontario [1], in England [8], and in the United States [62], which find a lack of teacher awareness of what has been covered in the curriculum of feeder schools, and a consequent repetition and redundancy which can be extremely deflating to motivation, and which may indicate to students a lack of seriousness and purposefulness in the program and its deliverers.

C. Relevance and Direction of Program Offered

The importance students place on career-oriented school experience, and the significant relationship which its presence in the school has to retention rates is probably best seen as evidence of students' desire for a sense of purpose, relevance and direction in their high school program. King found that, aside from high marks, the strongest correlate of student satisfaction with schools was the perception that courses were future-oriented and were thus of practical value [7]. It may not be unreasonable to relate this finding to the observation made in many studies of successful schools [56, 57, 58] that such schools are characterized by a serious and business-like attitude on the part of teachers, academic emphasis, and a high amount of learning time. All these communicate a sense of purposefulness to students.

For students in Advanced level programs, such purposefulness is achieved because they know their courses will qualify them for a university program. However, studies in Ontario [3, 7] indicate that students in General level programs are significantly less satisfied with school, and have higher failure and drop-out rates than students in Advanced and Basic level programs. It is plausible that for these students the General level program lacks obvious purpose and direction. In one study, Grade 9 General level enrollees were very specific about this [60]. The General level program does not prepare students for university; it is less obviously job skills-related than the basic level program; and most graduates of General level do not go on to community colleges. A related issue is the cohesiveness of the courses students select. They may choose a group of unrelated courses and avoid a course which will be more useful to their future because they fear it will be difficult. An important function of the guidance staff is to help students make course choices which will result in a cohesive program.

D. Evaluation and Progress

Nothing is more clearly related to low satisfaction with school and to dropping-out than course failure and low marks, experiences which are very common in Grade 9 in Ontario and which may not be wholly explained by the level of a student's performance [6. 7].

Studies in Ontario indicate very wide variation within and

across schools in academic expectations which teachers hold of students. "There is firm evidence ... that high failure rates are more related to variations in teacher expectations than student ability" [6]. Such inequities in standards disadvantage many students, and where they contribute to a high failure rate, are a primary cause of dropping-out.

E. Extra-curricular Programs

The importance of extra-curricular programs to student satisfaction and retention is high. In schools where a varied and comprehensive extra-curricular program is available, and where a high proportion of students participate in and/or watch sports, music and drama activities, student satisfaction is higher and drop-out rates are lower. Students place a very high value on the school-based social life and friendships which play such a large part in adolescent life. Given individual timetables and the credit system, extra-curricular activities may be the only organized part of the day in which they can feel a sense of group support and identification. In addition, extra-curricular activities offer opportunities for success outside of and in addition to academic activities.

F. Clear and Fair Policies

Another characteristic of successful schools mentioned in several studies has to do with fairness and even-handedness in dealings between staff and students. Clear-cut rules, standards, and policies regarding such matters as homework and discipline, and clear expectations and goals for behavior are associated with high retention rates and with academically successful schools. The consistent reinforcement of desired behavior and standards - through public recognition such as honour rolls, the posting of excellent work, and so forth - is an example of the clarification of standards, and there is evidence that such policies have positive results.

G. Staff Accessibility

In addition, students place high value on visibility and accessibility of administrators and teachers, in and out of office and classroom; and schools with high retention rates tend to incorporate such accessibility. One of the changes between elementary and secondary school appears to be a lessening of teacher-student interaction [8] perhaps as an outcome of the rotary system. Along with more work study experience and more counselling, drop-outs cited increased teacher-student interaction as what they most needed for motivation to stay in school [5]. A major American study recommends schools within schools, or vertical rather than horizontal integration, in part to promote more teacher/student interaction and involvement, by creating smaller units in which teachers will come to know their students better [62].

Summary

Several major factors are associated with successful transition and integration into high school. These include:

(1) a comprehensive, proactive guidance service, at both the feeder school and secondary school level, with a strong career orientation at the secondary level;

(2) a pervasive sense of clarity, relevance and purpose, communicated by teachers and by school policies and practices;

(3) opportunities for academic success;

(4) opportunities for friendship and social participation, to which the extra-curricular program makes a very central contribution;

(5) teachers and administrators who are perceived to be both fair and accessible.

III. ELEMENTARY TO SECONDARY: GENERAL PROCEDURES WHICH MAY FACILITATE TRANSITION *

For orientation/induction programs

1. The induction program can be spread out over a period of several months preceding and following the transition. Information can be given in sequenced steps via orientation activities in the spring, summer and fall.

2. A variety of information techniques can be used because people respond to various techniques differently. For instance, staff presentation can be supplemented by student-to-student presentations, and written materials by audio-visual presentation.

3. Since parents have to be well informed in order to help students make appropriate educational decisions, the possibility of setting up an orientation program for parents may be worth exploring.

4. The local cable television can be used as a tool to familiarize the community with the secondary school program. This can be done by having the high school principals, teachers and student leaders appear as guest speakers.

5. Developing and implementing orientation programs should not be the exclusive responsibility of either the elementary or secondary panel. Both must accept joint responsibility for the smooth transition.

6. The schools' resources can be identified and workloads readjusted so that the major responsibilities in the transition program do not always fall exclusively on the counselling staff.

7. In addition to the standard records required by the Board for transfer, samples of each individual student's writing can be part of a student's documentation.

8. The entire orientation program can be evaluated at various time points after its completion to determine whether the program objectives are met, in both the short and long term.

For articulation and successful long-term transition

1. A formal needs assessment can be conducted to define the problems related to transition and to determine the extent of such problems. The results of the assessment should be used as the basis for developing the goals and objectives of an articulation program.

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* It is recognized that many schools in Toronto already do some or many of the recommended actions listed below. The list is offered as a guide to review as well as to planning.

2. Policies can be developed to promote professional interaction and communication between the sending elementary school and the receiving secondary school, ideally including face-to-face meetings to discuss curriculum articulation and continuity of teaching styles and evaluation procedures.

3. Information, including guidelines and examples of procedures and practices for an articulation program could be developed for the system. Such material could depend on the OSIS intermediate Guidelines for content, and include suggestions for teaching and guidance strategies which will stress continuity.

4. Funds for a summer writing or similar project could be provided to develop sets of laminated strategies cards that contain ideas for transition programs. Ideally, each K-8 or 7-8 school and secondary school could be given a strategy box to enable the staff to have quick and easy access to some practical ideas on transition.

5. Secondary schools could develop an evaluation policy and procedure which is based on a common understanding and agreement of what are acceptable standards and pass/fail rates. Such policies and procedures should emphasize early evaluation, counselling and support systems for students who are having difficulties, in order to lower the course failure rate, especially in Grades 9 and 10.

6. Since written exams are only one way of evaluating students in secondary school, students might be exposed to other evaluation methods such as independent work, group work, and writing folders while in elementary school.

7. The importance to students at all academic levels of work/study programs, career counselling and information and class visitors cannot be minimized. Guidance personnel in secondary schools could work with other teaching staff to integrate such experiences into all the subject areas, and could also endeavor to see every student on an individual basis annually during the first three years of secondary school.

8. Within the secondary school, a staff committee can take responsibility for overseeing the quality of the extra-curricular program, to insure that it offers a wide variety of opportunities. Periodic (e.g. biennial) evaluation should take place, to establish how well it is serving the needs of the student body.

9. Each secondary school could develop information for students and parents, including clear and concise statements of school policies on attendance, behavior, homework and evaluation. Such statements can emphasize the seriousness of the educational enterprise, and the rewards -- both intrinsic and extrinsic, short- and long-term -- of social, academic and extra-curricular efforts and achievements in secondary school.

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APPENDIX A

Ontario and City of Toronto documents which pertain to transition from elementary to secondary schools:

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APPENDIX B

A recent book from Britain is a very informative guide to strategies for increasing curriculum continuity between elementary and secondary school. Curriculum continuity: primary to secondary [65] discusses elementary-secondary staff liaison in some detail, and describes several examples of curriculum continuity and coordination. An excerpt follows, from pages 149-153.

ESTABLISHING CONTINUITY: A SUGGESTED FRAMEWORK

STEP 1

Does liaison exist with primary schools?

| INFORMATION | What information does the secondary school receive from the primary schools? . . .

| PEOPLE AND ROLES | Which personnel are involved in liaison with primary/secondary school? . . .

Are staff visits specially arranged? Do they happen when the need arises or only once a year? Do the teachers (at all levels) involved in liaison have clear job specifications? Are these job specifications communicated clearly to all teaching staff?

| PUPILS | Do all primary children make at least one visit to the secondary school in their last term of primary education?
Do primary pupils host the secondary school on any other occasions?
Are there any special specialist facilities offered by the secondary school for occasional or regular use by primary children? (e.g. swimming pool, sports hall, computers, science facilities)

STEP 2

FROM THE PRIMARY VIEWPOINT

| CURRICULUM | What do primary school teachers know about the curriculum and organization of the secondary school to which their children transfer?
What would the primary school teachers like to know about the curriculum and organization of the secondary school? . . .

What grouping system is used immediately on transfer to secondary school? . . .

What kind of pastoral, house, tutorial system does the secondary school operate?
At transfer, does the secondary school have a policy of maintaining, wherever possible, existing friendship groupings? Or is an attempt made to form new social groupings?

Does the secondary school provide the primary schools with feedback about ex-pupils? What kind of feedback?

FROM THE SECONDARY VIEWPOINT

What do secondary school teachers know about the curriculum and organization of the primary schools?
What would the secondary school teachers like to know about the curriculum and organization of the primary schools?
MATHEMATICS
What is the schools approach to mathematics?
Are the children encouraged to use calculators?
Do the primary schools have computers?
How are these used?
What view does the primary school take on the learning of tables and number bonds?
READING, LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
How is reading taught in the primary school?
Is there a remedial scheme or remedial provision?
Does the primary school have a policy on extending reading skills?
Are library and reference skills taught?
What does the primary school do about spelling, language, grammar, handwriting, creative working?
What experience is offered the children in literature and poetry?
Is drama encouraged?
Does the primary school have a policy for the development of language skills?
How is oral communication encouraged?
SCIENCE
What scientific experiences have the children had?
Has the approach to science been systematic through the use of a scheme such as Science 5/13?
Have the children been encouraged to handle animals? Have they been encouraged to conduct their own simple experiments?
HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY
What has been the approach to history and geography in the primary school?
Has a topic approach been used?
Have the children been encouraged to read or listen to historical fiction?
Does the primary school use a history or a geography text book?

Have the children been introduced to maps, atlases?
Have the children experienced any historical/ geographical field-trips?
ARTS
What kinds of aesthetic, creative, musical experiences does the primary school provide?
What kinds of media (clay, paint etc.) have the children experienced?

STEP 3

STARTING DISCUSSIONS

CURRICULUM

A suggested programme:

1. Informal social professional meetings of heads. The place of the meeting should be chosen carefully and not automatically assumed to be in the secondary school.
2. Informal meetings of individuals (e.g. head of lower school and primary class teachers) on each others' territory.
3. The exchange of any written documentation of a general nature such as school brochures or handbooks.
4. The exchange of any available documents about aspects of the curriculum, e.g. a primary school language or maths scheme, a secondary school statement on the teaching of English.
5. Meetings to plan more formal developments. Possibilities:
   (a) Regular meetings of departmental staff from secondary schools and primary staff.
   Perhaps making a start with one department - maths or English.
   (b) A whole day conference involving the closing of schools and the bringing together of primary and secondary staff.